

Having trouble coping?



Stressed out?

Feeling overwhelmed?

If your answer is YES, you are not alone

2 out of every 3 Canadians are coping with moderate to high levels of stress in their daily lives.

## Are you experiencing signs of stress?

- Nervous and “stressed”?
- Upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
- Feel like you can’t cope with all the things that you have to do?
- Angry because of things that happened that were outside your control?
- Thinking about things that you have to accomplish?
- Feeling difficulties are piling up so high that you can’t overcome them?
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep?
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions?
- Major changes to your appetite or eating patterns?
- Frequent urges to use the washroom?
- Frequent headaches, upset stomach, or other aches and pains?
- Using alcohol or drugs to escape or feel better?
- Feeling tired all the time?

(Adapted in part from Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983)

### Common Sources of Daily Stress

		<b>Home life issues</b>	
	<b>Getting children ready or picking them up</b>		<b>Other responsibilities relating to children</b>
<b>Family problems or responsibilities</b>	<b>Too much to do in too little time</b>		<b>Spouse or partner issues</b>
<b>Phone calls or emails</b>	<b>Personal relationships or family members</b>		<b>No time for fun activities</b>
<b>Pace of life too fast</b>	<b>Other job or work demands</b>		<b>Personal health problems</b>
<b>Feeling tired or fatigued</b>		<b>Getting ready for work</b>	
<b>Traffic or commuting</b>	<b>School or homework</b>		<b>Political or government issues</b>
	<b>Start or end of the work day</b>		
	<b>Family member’s health problems</b>		
	<b>Finances and bills</b>		
			<b>Household chores</b>

### Who is most at risk for high levels of stress?

- **Women**
- **Single parents**
- **Younger adults**
- **People with lower levels of education**
- **People with lower levels of income**
- **People with poor housing**
- **People who put too much pressure on themselves**
- **People with high levels of responsibilities and duties**

We tend to feel stressed out when the demands of our daily life feel like too much for us to manage.

Another common source of stress is major life events or changes.

Both positive and negative life events can be stressful—especially those that involve major changes or upheavals to our regular routines.

Changes in housing arrangements	Pregnancy
Being in jail or some other institution	Major personal injury or illness
Planning and taking vacation	Outstanding personal achievement
Starting or finishing school	Sexual difficulties
Major changes in work duties or changing to new line of work	Getting married, divorced or separated
Being fired or laid off from job	Fights or conflict with family or friends
Filing income tax return	Major change in health or behaviour of family member
Major celebrations (e.g., seasonal holidays, birthdays)	Death of close family or friend
Moving	Retirement
Major changes to finances	

### Common Stressful Events



What kinds of stress are you coping with these days? Take our stress survey at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) to determine the different sources of stress you and your family are facing.

## Why does stress make me feel so awful?

Sometimes stress can have a negative effect on the basic dimensions of health (our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions). Stress is more likely to have a negative impact on our health if the stress makes us feel threatened or at risk of danger or loss. Stress will also bring down our health if we respond with unhealthy behaviours that do not improve the situation. The negative effects of stress upon our wellness can become a source of stress in and of themselves. Just talk to anyone who is not getting a good night's sleep due to stress and they will know exactly what we mean! For more information about the dimensions of mental health that can be influenced by stress, see **Wellness Module 1: Mental Health Matters**.

Many Canadians report that stress negatively impacts their lives

- 48% **Sleep quality**
- 41% **Personal health**
- 33% **Home or family**
- 23% **Quality of sex life**
- 23% **Quality of work**

Ipsos-Reid, 2002

## Can stress be a good thing?

Sometimes stress can have a positive effect on the basic dimensions of mental health (our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions). Stress is more likely to result in positive outcomes if we see it as a challenge or something we can strive to overcome. Stress can also lead to positive effects if we respond with healthy behaviours that improve our situation. We can experience the positive effects of stress even in the face of some negative effects.

Many Canadians report that stress positively impacts their lives

- 46% **I exercise in response to stress**
- 48% **Stress is proof I am involved in important things**
- 31% **Stress improves the quality of my work**

Ipsos-Reid, 2002

## Stress and illness

Our stress levels and how we cope can also influence our physical health. Higher levels of stress can lower our immunity to disease or infection. For example, upper respiratory infections (e.g., colds, influenza, etc.) are more likely when we are coping with high levels of stress. There is also evidence that stress can aggravate autoimmune disorders including rheumatoid arthritis, insulin-dependent diabetes, multiple sclerosis and more. Some of the connections between stress and illness are determined by the ways we cope with our stress.

# Coping with Stress

**There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to cope with stress. Research has shown what works for one person may not work for another, and what works in one situation may not work in another. Listed below are common ways of coping and tips on how to ensure your coping choices lead to reductions in stress and a healthier, more fulfilling life for you and your loved ones.**

## Focus on what we can do

There is usually something we can do to manage stress in most situations.

- Resist the urge to give up or run away from problems—these coping choices usually make stress worse in the long run.

## Manage our emotions

Feelings of sadness, anger or fear are common when coping with stress.

It is more difficult to feel happiness, contentment or joy when coping with stress.

- Try not to bottle your emotions up—instead, try expressing your feelings by talking or writing them down
- Try not to lash out at other people (yelling or swearing will tend to push people away when we need them the most)
- Many of the coping strategies listed below are useful ways of managing our emotions

## Seek out support

Seeking social support from other people is helpful—especially when we feel we can’t cope on our own.

Family, friends, co-workers and health professionals can all be important sources of support.

- Ask someone for their opinion or advice on how to handle the situation
- Get more information to help make decisions
- Accept help with daily tasks and responsibilities (e.g., chores, child care)
- Get emotional support from someone who understands and cares about you

## Focus on the positives

This is one of the hardest things to do when coping with stress and at times can seem impossible.

Dwelling on the negatives often adds to our stress and takes away our motivation to make things better.

- Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses—remind yourself that no one is perfect
- Look for the challenges in a situation by asking “What can I learn from this?” or “How can I grow as a person?”
- Keep in mind how things could be worse
- Try to keep a sense of humour
- Remind yourself you are doing the best you can given the circumstances

## Make a plan of action

Problem-solving the controllable aspects of a stressful situation is one of the most effective ways to lower our stress.

Try breaking a stressful problem into manageable chunks.

A good plan of action can involve putting other tasks on hold to concentrate on the main problem or waiting for the right time and place to act.

- Identify and define the problem
- Select your goal
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Consider the pros and cons
- Choose the best solution—the perfect solution rarely exists
- Put your plan into action
- Evaluate your efforts and choose another strategy if need be see our Problem-Solving Module at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/)

## Self-Care

None of us will cope well if we do not take care of the basics. Taking good care of ourselves can be difficult during stressful times.

If we don’t balance work with play, most of us will experience burnout.

- Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water throughout the day to maintain your energy
- Try to exercise or do something active on a regular basis
- Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way of coping
- Practice meditation, yoga or other relaxation techniques
- Take regular breaks from work to maintain stamina
- Plan fun activities and hobbies so you can look forward to them
- Get a good night’s sleep

## Take care of our relationships

Family, friends and co-workers can be affected by our stress and they can also be part of the problem.

Keep the feelings and needs of others in mind when coping with stress, but balance them with your own.

- Be assertive about your needs rather than aggressive or passive
- Try not to confront others in a mean-spirited or antagonizing manner
- Accept responsibility, apologize or try to put things right when appropriate
- Talk to others who are involved and keep them informed about your decisions

# Coping with Stress | continued from inside

## Religious or Spiritual Practice

People with religious or spiritual practice as part of their daily lives often experience lower levels of distress and other benefits such as helpful social support.

- Pray or meditate
- Go to your place of worship
- Talk to your religious/spiritual leader
- Have faith in God or your higher power
- Get together with others of the same faith or spiritual orientation

## Acceptance

Accepting those things we cannot change can be the most challenging aspect of coping with stress.

Sometimes all we can do is manage our distress or grief.

- Denying the problem exists will only prolong our suffering and interferes with our ability to take action
- Acceptance is a process that takes time, so be patient
- Death, illness, major losses or major life changes can be particularly difficult to accept
- Try not to get caught up in wishful thinking or dwelling on what could have been

## Distraction

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress we can't control (e.g., reading a magazine while getting dental work done)

Distraction can be harmful if it interferes with us taking action over things under our control (e.g., watching TV when we have school or work deadlines to meet)

Distraction by using drugs, alcohol or over-eating usually leads to more stress and problems in the long-term

Distraction by overworking at school or on the job can easily lead to burnout or other problems (e.g., family resentment)

Almost anything can be used as a way of taking our minds off our problems:

- Daydreaming
- Going for a drive or walk
- Leisure activities, exercise, hobbies
- Housework, yard work or gardening
- Watching TV or movies
- Playing video games
- Spending time with friends or family
- Spending time with pets
- Surfing the Internet or doing email
- Sleeping or taking a short nap

*When used for short periods of time, many of these forms of distraction create opportunities to take a break and refuel—an important part of self-care.*

## To explore ways of coping that do not involve harm or violence, please consider the following options:

- Let someone who cares about you know what is happening so they can help keep you and your loved ones safe from harm  
Seek professional help immediately (e.g., physician, drop-in health clinic, emergency room at local hospital, mental health centre, psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor)
  - Crisis Lines: See the inside cover of your telephone book for listings in your area or visit [www.crisiscentre.bc.ca/findhelphere.htm](http://www.crisiscentre.bc.ca/findhelphere.htm)
  - Parenting Support Hotline: Call 1-888-603-9100 (free call anywhere in Canada) or visit [www.parenthelpline.ca](http://www.parenthelpline.ca)
  - Kids' Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 (free call anywhere in Canada)

Harming ourselves, other people, animals or property is never a safe or healthy way of coping with stress.

## Select Sources

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- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 385-396.

## You might also be interested in...

- Blonna, R. (1999). **Coping with Stress in a Changing World (with Letting Go of Stress audiobook)**. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- **BC Partners Stress Pages** see [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/tellmeabout/stress.shtml](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/tellmeabout/stress.shtml)
- **Mind Tools Stress Management** see [www.mindtools.com/smpage.html](http://www.mindtools.com/smpage.html)